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**TRUMAN'S ATOMIC BOMB DECISION:  
AN ATTACK ON JAPAN'S CENTER OF GRAVITY**

BY

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**TRUMAN'S ATOMIC BOMB DECISION:  
AN ATTACK ON JAPAN'S CENTER OF GRAVITY**

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Truman's decision to use nuclear weapons to end the War in the Pacific is the subject of much debate. The purpose of this paper is to look at the debate between traditional and revisionist historian views on the subject and gain a better understanding of Truman's decision. The paper shows support for the theory that Truman's decision was appropriate because it was his best available option. It also shows that the Atom bomb actually attacked Japan's center of gravity, the will of the elite Japanese leadership team who administered the war. It did this while at the same time protecting what had become the United States center of gravity by the end of the War--the will of the people of the United States to continue a protracted, costly war.

## Truman's Atomic Bomb Decision:

### An Attack on Japan's Center of Gravity

#### Introduction:

During a three-day period in August 1945, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan. These two bombs killed more than 115,000 people and possibly as many as 250,000 and injured at least another 100,000.<sup>1</sup>

After the war, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki raised some serious ethical and historical questions about why and how they were used. Would the bombs have been used against Germany? Why did the United States target cities so that so many civilians would be killed? Were there likely alternative ways to end the war speedily and avoid the Allies scheduled November 1, 1945, invasion of Kyushu?<sup>2</sup> There are still other questions that deserve to be answered. These include why wasn't a demonstration of the atomic bomb's power adequate to end the war? Why were two bombs dropped? Wouldn't one have done the job of forcing Japanese surrender? Did the United States drop the bombs primarily as a diplomatic device for dealing with the postwar Soviet Union?<sup>3</sup>

The most germane question remains: Was the United States justified in dropping the two atomic bombs that killed so many people, the vast majority civilians? Or to put it more bluntly, was Truman right or wrong?<sup>4</sup>

The answers to these questions are significant today.

Today's national and military leaders who now harness the power of nuclear weapons should not forget how and why the United States entered the nuclear age. Since our development of the H-Bomb from 1950 to 1952<sup>5</sup> and our subsequent evolution of nuclear warheads speared by the cold war with the USSR, the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs pale in comparison to the megaton thermonuclear devices that the world class nuclear powers now possess. Ignorance of the facts and issues surrounding the dropping of the atom bombs could lead to poor decisions with dire consequences.

The purpose of this paper is to show that the United States was correct to use the atom bomb as a tool to end the war by attacking Japan's center of gravity, the will of the Japanese military leadership to fight the war. There have been two widely opposing predominate schools of thought as to why the atom bombs were dropped, the traditionalist, and the revisionist views. In order to better understand the decision, it is worthwhile to understand some of the issues still debated. Issues addressed by each of the questions provide a good framework to understand the complexity of why President Truman made the decision.

The traditionalist view is that President Truman made the decision to drop the bomb in order to save American and Japanese lives that would have been lost in Japan's final great defense of the Japanese home Islands. The other view or, the revisionist view, says that Truman's motivation for dropping the bombs was not to defeat Japan. According to this view, Japan was already defeated. The most popular revisionists belief is that the real

purpose behind the decision to drop the bomb was to send a strong message to the Soviet Union that we had an ultimate weapon.<sup>6</sup> Many revisionists maintain that this type of nuclear diplomacy by demonstrating our nuclear power violated the laws of war, or was unnecessarily cruel and morally wrong, and eventually led to the nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union and the cold war.

#### **Addressing the questions**

**Would the bombs have been used against Germany?** In order to address this issue you should understand that the idea of an atomic bomb originated in NAZI Germany when German scientists discovered nuclear fission in 1938.<sup>7</sup> A short history of the Manhattan Project will help to understand how the United States got involved.

On Oct 11, 1939, President Roosevelt received an alarming letter from Albert Einstein. In that now famous letter Einstein alerted President Roosevelt to the potential for atomic bombs. Even though Britain and France were then at war with Germany, the results of that letter were modest. President Roosevelt established the federal Advisory Committee on Uranium and U.S. scientist working on nuclear energy received a \$6,000 grant to continue their work at Columbia University in New York City.<sup>8</sup>

These nuclear scientists included Enrico Fermi. Fermi was the 1938 Nobel Prize winner in Physics. He had used the Nobel Prize ceremony in Stockholm as an excuse to take him and his

family out of Italy and eventually to the United States because he feared the racist decrees that Mussolini's regime had begun to copy off of Hitler would be a threat to his Jewish wife.<sup>9</sup>

Also at Columbia was a Jewish scientist named Leo Szilard. Szilard was an eccentric genius who moved from his native Hungary to Berlin in 1920. Then in 1933, days after the Reichstag fire, he fled the Nazis to Vienna. His travels then took him to London and finally in 1938 to America.

These two scientist and others who emigrated to the United States in the face of Hitler's totalitarian advance were instrumental in the United State's eventual development of the Atomic Bomb. They understood the potential for weapons of great power, and they feared that the Germans would get there first.<sup>10</sup>

After the urging by scientists, Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, and Hitler's subsequent declaration of war against the United States, President Roosevelt initiated the atomic bomb project code named Manhattan Project in January 1942.<sup>11</sup> Roosevelt and his advisors at the time felt that the United States was in a desperate race with Hitler's Germany for the bomb. Roosevelt and his aids felt that the A-bomb was a legitimate weapon that would be used against Nazi Germany.<sup>12</sup>

So America made the A-bomb out of fear of the possibility of a German A-Bomb. By 1944, the A-bomb project employed 129,000 people to include a secret community of some of the best scientists, mathematicians and engineers in the world at Los Alamos, New Mexico.<sup>13</sup>

It is clear that if the Manhattan Project had developed atomic bombs on an earlier time table then they would have been used against Germany. Not only was the whole project initiated because of the fear that Germany may obtain the bomb first, the Allies obliterated Dresden and several other towns as thoroughly as the atom bomb destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Also, the directive issued to COL Paul Tibbs in September 1944 instructed him to train two bomber groups to make simultaneous drops on Germany and Japan.<sup>14</sup>

General Leslie Groves, director of the Manhattan Project, recalled a meeting with Roosevelt in December 1944 in which the president "was concerned that the Battle of the Bulge might upset the timetable for ending the war in Europe and remarked that maybe this would force us to use the bomb against Germany." Additionally, Groves recounted that at another meeting, "President Roosevelt asked if we were prepared to drop bombs on Germany if it was necessary to do so and we replied that we would be prepared to do so if necessary."<sup>15</sup> As it worked out, Germany surrendered three months before the atomic bomb was ready.

Some observers express the view that Japan was a victim of the Atomic bomb primarily because of the United States racist views toward Japanese and that we would not have done the same thing to caucasians in the European war.<sup>16</sup> The facts mentioned in the preceding paragraphs decrease the credibility of that argument.

That does not relieve President Truman from the charge that

he was racist. Evidence shows that he was. Truman used the "n-word" frequently, including in letters to his wife, Bess. In one letter, Truman writes, his Uncle Will "says the Lord made a white man of dust, a nigger from mud, then threw up what was left and it came down a Chinaman. He does hate Chinese and Japs. So do I." Although this is an example of his racist attitudes and the attitudes of many Americans at the time (and perhaps -- unfortunately even now). Harry did do some things that show a different side of him, such as integrating the military services after the war.<sup>17</sup>

Barton Bernstein, a noted author and a careful student of the Hiroshima decision, probably summed this issue up best in his 1975 statement "Probably policy makers found it easier to use the bomb against yellow people (the Japanese) than the whites (the Germans), but racism did not dictate the decision to drop the bombs on Japan. U.S. leaders would undoubtedly have used the bombs against Germany if they had been developed in time to speed a surrender in Europe"<sup>18</sup>

***Why did the United States target cities so that so many civilians would be killed?*** This question gets at the morality and reality of the war by the end of WWII. Two quotes bring the war in 1945 into focus:

***"From the practical standpoint of the soldiers out in the field it doesn't make any difference how you slay an enemy. Everybody worries about their own losses...But to worry about the morality of what we were doing -- Nuts. A soldier has to fight.***

We fought. If we accomplished the job in any given battle without exterminating too many of our own folks, we considered that we'd had a pretty good day."

--Gen. Curtis Lemay<sup>19</sup>

"What was criminal in Coventry, Rotterdam, Warsaw, and London has now become heroic first in Dresden and now in Tokyo."

--Oswald Garrison Villard<sup>20</sup>

The issue of why the United States attacked cities is complex in itself. First of all, the Second World War in both theaters had become more and more savage. The bombing of cities came about as the result of several factors. These factors included the desire to strike enemies from afar and thereby avoid the awful trench-war slaughter of 1914-1918; the industrial capacity of the Allies to build great bomber fleets; the ability of enemy fighters' anti-aircraft to shoot down attacking aircraft that flew by daylight or at low altitudes; the inability of bombers to strike targets accurately from high altitudes; the difficulty of finding all but very large targets (that is, cities) at night; the desire of airmen to prove that air forces were an important military arm, the natural hardening of hearts in wartime; and the relative absence of people willing to ask publicly if bombing civilians was right.<sup>21</sup>

The firebombing of Dresden set a precedent for the U.S. Air Force, supported largely by the American people, to intentionally

kill mass numbers of Japanese citizens. The early moral standards of insistence on noncombatant immunity crumbled as the war lingered on. In Tokyo, during March 9-10 1945, a U.S. air attack killed about 80,000 Japanese civilians. General LeMay's bombers, using new techniques, dropped napalm on the city's heavily populated areas to produce uncontrollable firestorms.<sup>22</sup>

Even with this moral decline, evidence shows that President Truman did not want to drop atomic bombs on cities. He really wanted military targets. In his diary he wrote about his guidance to his targeting staff, "I have told Sec. of War...Stimson to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children...the target will be a purely military one."<sup>23</sup>

Hiroshima and Nagasaki had several factors that made them acceptable targets. Hiroshima was the headquarters for the Second Army and had a garrison of about 25,000 troops.<sup>24</sup> The United States wanted to avoid military targets that had known allied Prisoners of War. There were no known allied prisoners of war in Hiroshima or Nagasaki. (Although, two allied POWs actually died in the attack on Hiroshima)<sup>25</sup>. The committee of scientists and ordnance experts recommended targets that would assure "the greatest psychological effect against Japan" and would make the initial use of the bomb "sufficiently spectacular for the importance of the weapon to be internationally recognized when publicity on it is released."<sup>26</sup>

Both Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been spared the firebombing

raids and the effects of the atomic bomb would be more easily identified and therefore more spectacular. In reality though, Nagasaki was a substitute target for Kyoto.<sup>27</sup>

Kyoto was spared for three reasons: First, with a population of about one million, it was larger than necessary to make the point of the bomb's destruction. Second, Kyoto had a unique historical and religious significance to Japan. Third, and the real clincher was that Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson had visited Kyoto decades before and had been deeply impressed by its ancient culture.<sup>28</sup> Had Stimson not intervened and disapproved Kyoto, the results of the atomic bomb attacks on Japan would have likely been even much more worse than they were.

***Were there likely alternative ways to end the war speedily and avoid the Allies scheduled November 1, 1945, invasion of Kyushu?***

Historical evidence shows that Japan was a defeated country by late July 1945, and that some Japanese leaders realized this. However, there is a lot of difference between defeat and surrender. The issue was how to get Japan, notably the militarists who ruled the nation, to quit.<sup>29</sup> To do this, President Truman had six options:

1. Invade Japan in two stages. This would prolong the war for at least a year and there would be large numbers of American and Allied casualties.

2. Continue the aerial bombing and naval blockade until the Japanese lost the will to resist and surrendered.

3. Get the Russians into the war. Perhaps this would crack the Japanese resolve and make them sue for peace.

4. Accept Japan's proposals to negotiate by modifying the demand for an unconditional surrender to permit Japan to retain the Emperor. This was a vital point to the Japanese. Along with this, agreeing to a minimal occupation of Japan.

5. Warn that atomic bombs would be used unless Japan surrendered, and possibly detonate one as a demonstration.

6. Drop the atomic bombs to shock the Japanese into quitting before more devastation was unleashed on their nation.<sup>30</sup>

From 12 April until 24 July Truman and his advisors considered all these options to some degree. This was not done in a methodical process. Government was no more neat and orderly than it is today. However, on 24 July, Truman approved the order to drop the bombs after 3 August 1945. Truman was doing what he felt was necessary to bring an end to three and a half years of brutal, draining, and desperate war.<sup>31</sup>

**Option 1, the invasion.** Invasion plans included two separate assaults. The plan for the first assault, code-named Olympic, scheduled for 1 November 1945 was onto the home island of Kyushu, Japan's southwestern island. The second assault, code named Coronet scheduled 1 March 1946 was onto the island of Honshu, against Tokyo. Expected casualties were high based on the fact that as American forces got closer to Japan the Japanese became ever more ferocious in defending their homeland. Estimates are from a low of 40,000 on up.<sup>32</sup>

As Olympic neared two US Army agencies made independent estimates of invasion casualties. The Philadelphia Quartermaster depot ordered more than 370,000 Purple Hearts for award to the wounded and families of those killed in the final battles for Japan. On Luzon in the Philippines, the Sixth Army's medical staff estimated that casualties from the Kyushu assault and subsequent fighting to secure the southern half of the island would cost 394,000 Americans dead, wounded and missing.<sup>33</sup> Besides the fear for those involved with the assault, there was also a great fear that the Japanese would slaughter their captives if their sacred homeland were invaded.<sup>34</sup>

The exact number of casualties will never be known because Truman did not accept this option. One can only imagine what would have happened if Truman had decided to use this option and 40,000 to 370,000 young Americans had been killed or wounded and then it became known that the president had chosen not to employ weapons that might have ended the war months earlier.

A look at the Japanese preparation for battles for Kyushu and Honshu show that those battles would have likely been the most bloody and deadly in history. The Japanese leaders were urging a last Decisive Battle and the war was getting more desperate on both sides.

In January 1945, Admiral Koshiro Oikawa, chief of the Navy General Staff, and General Yoshijiro Umezu, chief of the General Staff gave Emperor Hirohito (as commander in chief of the Imperial Army and Navy), a Report to the Throne on the conduct of

the war. This warned the emperor of the expected invasion to come as early as August. The report said "it is characteristic of Americans to hold human lives so dear...it is necessary that we take advantage of this weakness, and inflict tremendous losses on the enemy, using all possible methods."<sup>35</sup>

The report never mentioned suicide weapons, but clearly, this was what was meant by "all possible methods". These suicide methods included one-way submarines, manned, high-speed small boats that exploded when they hit an enemy ship, human torpedoes, and human bombs and mines.<sup>36</sup> At this point of the war, Japan was overwhelmingly outnumbered on the sea and in the sky, Japan's strategists saw their only hope was to fight primarily on land "in bloody operations ...to crush the enemy's fighting spirit."<sup>37</sup>

Much like the North Viet Nam would do later, Japanese strategists estimated the United State's vulnerability and perhaps its center of gravity at this point of the war was the will to fight a bloody, drawn out campaign. It is not difficult to imagine Japan's strategy working. It worked well for the North Vietnamese.

The Big Six, determined Japan's grand strategy. This group, officially titled the Supreme Council for the Direction of the War, included the foreign minister, the ministers of War and the Navy, and the chiefs of the Army and Navy general staffs. The Army and Navy chiefs told the civilian Cabinet members very little about the conduct of the war, claiming the need to protect military secrets. But when the council met on June 6, the Army

came forth with a plan for the future direction of the war, the plan for the Decisive Battle.<sup>38</sup>

Lieutenant General Torashiro Kawabe, the Army's vice chief of staff, described the Decisive Battle. He said the enemy "will be met at the point of landing by an overwhelming Japanese force, which will continue its attack until he is defeated and turned back". He went on to say that Kamikaze planes would wipe out one-quarter of the invading forces at sea and another quarter during the attempted amphibious landing; the rest of the invaders would be annihilated at the beachhead. Japanese strategists believed that a tactical victory at the beachhead would lead the Allies to call for a negotiated peace. The Army's fight-to-the-end plans was presented to the Emperor on 8 June and he silently accepted it.<sup>39</sup>

As mentioned before, the war was getting more desperate for both sides. American leaders were extremely anxious to end the war. This leads to other strong evidence that this invasion could have been very much more deadly for American troops than any prediction made by planners.

Because of misunderstanding of the effects of nuclear radiation, Major General Leslie R. Groves, director of the Manhattan Project, convinced General Marshall that tactical nuclear weapons could support the invasion of Kyushu. Marshall envisioned that at least nine atomic bombs could have been used in the invasion, three bombs in each of the three U.S. corps areas.<sup>40</sup> It is easy to imagine now how costly in lives this

could have been after we have seen the results of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Chernobyl. What we forget is that little was known about effects of radiation at that time. In fact, as an example of the prevailing naivety during this period, shoe stores routinely used X-ray machines as an aid for fitting customers.<sup>41</sup>

**Option 2, Continuing to bomb and blockade.** This is a common option for opponents of the decision to drop the bomb and for proponents of conventional bombing to espouse. It is interesting to note that some of those who criticize the decision to drop the atomic bombs propose this as the preferable solution to end the war. This would very likely have been much more deadly for the Japanese people than the dropping of the atomic bombs. Remember, 80,000 people were killed in the Tokyo firebombing attacks.<sup>42</sup>

General Curtis LeMay had a firm timetable in mind for the 21st Bomber Command. General Lemay told General H.H. ("Hap") Arnold, the commander in chief of the Army Air Corps, that he expected to destroy all Japanese cities before the end of the fall. Truman needed only to wait. In other words, steady bombing, the disappearance of one city after another in fire storms, the death of another 100,000 Japanese civilians every week or ten days would have forced the cabinet, the army, and the Emperor to do what two atomic bombs ended up doing -- to surrender.<sup>43</sup> This option called for leveling towns with a minimum of 5,400,000 people by the end of October.<sup>44</sup> Exactly how many deaths would have occurred will never be known. However, it is easy to visualize many more deaths than the Atomic bombs

caused.

**Option 3, Get the Russians into the war.** The Russians promised to enter the war in August. However, there is little evidence that Japan would have quit when this took place even if the Russians had reached the southern tip of Korea. The high command in Tokyo was not counting on forces on the Asian mainland to defend Japan proper.<sup>45</sup>

If this had been the option settled upon, it is very doubtful that it would have given Japan, or the world better results than we have now. Soviet troops by early 1946 would have consolidated positions in Manchuria and taken over most or all of Korea, southern Sakhalin Island, and the Kurils. Stalin would have executed his plan for an amphibious-airborne assault on Hokkaido. The result most likely would have been a Japan divided into U.S. and Soviet occupation zones, with Korea entirely occupied by the Red Army, and China even more rapidly taken over by Soviet aided communists.<sup>46</sup>

**Option 4, Accept Japan's proposals to negotiate by modifying the demand for unconditional surrender and permitting Japan to retain the Emperor.** This is the most common option proposed by critics who have condemned the use of atomic bombs.<sup>47</sup> This was seen by Truman and his advisors as breaking faith with Allies and a political land mine within the United States where the public backed unconditional surrender.<sup>48</sup>

The idea that Japan would have capitulated in June or July if only Washington had extended a promise about the emperor rests

on the fallacy that this was the only obstacle to peace. Surrender was alien to the Japanese samurai tradition. Senior army men were well aware that there were many younger officers who were prepared to take any measures, including assassination, to prevent a humiliating surrender.<sup>49</sup>

An American proposal to keep the Emperor would have undoubtedly been viewed by Japanese hard-liners as a weakening of resolve and that continued resistance would coerce further concessions. Stalin would have condemned such a proposal as a treacherous attempt to negate the Yalta agreement by striking a deal before Russia entered the war. Finally, even though Truman on several occasions had said he had no objection to preserving the emperorship, he insisted that Tokyo made the first move. Japan never indicated openly or in any intercepted messages that the only prerequisite for surrender was retention of the emperor.<sup>50</sup>

MAGIC, the diplomatic codebreaking operation intercepted messages between Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo and Ambassador Naotake Sato in Moscow which some speculate indicate that Japan was ready to surrender. MAGIC intercepts of messages did not show a Japan ready to surrender. What they did show was "an elite ready to negotiate an armistice, fearful of word getting to the military about what they were doing."<sup>51</sup>

Actually, even the Emperor himself was not really an actor in making the decisions, a military faction made up primarily of army zealots had controlled the empire since the 1930s.<sup>52</sup> The

military faction included Minister of War Anami, Army Chief of Staff Yoshijiro Umezu, and Navy Chief of Staff Soemuwere Toyoda. These were the Japanese in control and they never favored surrender, "not after Saipan was lost, not after Iwo Jima was lost, not after the Philippines were lost, not after Okinawa, not even after two atom bombs and a Soviet Declaration of War."<sup>53</sup>

Option 5, Warn the Japanese that atomic bombs would be used unless Japan surrendered, and possibly detonate one as a demonstration. This idea received some attention by the Scientist Panel who advised the secret Interim Committee on the bomb. Members of this panel were J. Robert Oppenheimer, Arthur H. Compton, Enrico Fermi and Ernest Lawrence.<sup>54</sup> After the panel's discussion of the issue Oppenheimer said that he could think of no display that would be sufficient to induce Japan to surrender and Comptom reported, "No one could suggest a way in which {a demonstration} could be made so convincing that it would be likely to stop the war"<sup>55</sup> Leo Slizard, another key scientist in the development of the bomb at times argued both for and against a demonstration. However, he later told an interviewer "I think it is clear that you can't demonstrate a bomb over an uninhabited island. You have to demolish a city."<sup>56</sup>

Truman's administration dismissed the idea of a demonstration not only because the scientists did not feel it would be convincing. There were fears that it could be a dud or that this would be wasting one of only two bombs available at that time. Still, there were other concerns. There was a fear

that the Japanese might shoot down the airplane carrying the bomb, or that the Japanese might think the United States had only one bomb.<sup>57</sup> Finally, another concern was that the Japanese might bring prisoners of war to the demonstration area.<sup>58</sup>

**Option 6, Drop the atomic bombs to shock the Japanese into quitting before more devastation was unleashed on their nation.**

This of course was the option that President Truman took. On 24 July in Potsdam, Truman approved its use. The next night, he wrote in his diary: "We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world....It seems to be the most terrible thing ever discovered, but it can be made useful."<sup>59</sup>

Truman and his administration really predetermined as part of this plan to drop two bombs, one for Hiroshima one for Nagasaki.

***Why were two bombs dropped? Wouldn't one have done the job of forcing Japanese surrender?***

There is much debate over these questions. However, the answer to these questions is that two bombs indirectly attacked Japan's center of gravity, the Japan's elite leadership team. This team included the Big Six, the Supreme Council for the Direction of the War and was overlooked by Emperor Hirohito. Evidence shows that the Hiroshima bomb convinced some, but not all, of the group that it was necessary to surrender. However, after hesitation and continued discussion the shock effect brought on by the combination of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs lead to events that brought about the surrender.

The main reason for dropping two bombs is that was what General Leslie Groves, the man in charge of the Manhattan Project, thought was necessary to defeat Japan. In his words the second bomb was "so that the Japanese would not have time to recover their balance".<sup>60</sup>

The following section of this paper will discuss General Groves conclusion and show that information about what was going on behind the scenes with Japanese leaders reveal that he was correct.

Groves formulated the decision to drop two atomic bombs on Japan in late 1944. He had discussed this with Rear Admiral William Purnell, the Manhattan Engineer District (MED) naval member of the MED Military Policy Committee. According to Groves, "I concluded sometime in December 1944 that two bombs would conclude the war after several discussions with Rear Admiral William Purnell,...He had served in the Philippines and the Orient. He had spent a great deal of time in 1940-41 as well as before in studying the Japanese character and their probable reactions in time of war. As a result of our discussions I concluded that two bombs would end the war".<sup>61</sup>

Groves went on to explain, "I gave my conclusions to General Marshall, Secretary of War Stimson, and President Roosevelt and later to President Truman. None of them appeared to question them as being unreasonable."<sup>62</sup>

On July 16, 1945, near Alamogordo, New Mexico, the atomic age began. Within minutes after witnessing the bomb test,

General Thomas Farrell, Groves deputy, said to General Groves, "The war is over!" "Yes," replied Groves, "it is over as soon as we drop two bombs on Japan."<sup>63</sup>

General Groves had a crucial role in the decision-making process. The two-bomb plan was his, and he wrote the order to General Carl Spaatz that directed the 509th Composite Group that a second bomb (and succeeding bombs) would be used as soon as possible after August 3. After Groves's directive was sent to the bomb team on July 25, only a countermanding order from Marshall, Stimson, or Truman could halt the process.<sup>64</sup>

On July 26, President Truman and the Allies issued the Potsdam Proclamation. This was a last chance ultimatum to Japan. Secretary of War Stimson suggested that the president include a concession on the emperor. Truman rejected this and instead called for a government "in accordance with the freely expressed will of the Japanese people, a peacefully inclined and responsible government."

Truman also ruled out warning Japan of the coming atomic attack. He called for "the government of Japan to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all Japanese armed forces. The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction." Japan did not surrender, therefore, the order of July 25 remained active. Truman told Stimson the directive would stand "unless I notified him that the Japanese reply to our ultimatum was acceptable."<sup>65</sup>

On August 6, Hiroshima was instantly destroyed. General

Groves wrote the press release that President Truman read to the nation. The statement declared, "The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East." President Truman went on to say that if the Japanese did not now accept the Potsdam Declaration, "they may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the likes of which has never been seen on this earth."<sup>66</sup>

Groves' concern that the second bomb follow swiftly after the first resulted in a "mood of urgency" among those responsible for executing the mission. The second bomb was scheduled for August 20. However, when the necessary fissionable material arrived sooner than originally expected, the bomb team hurried to make the second bomb available as quickly as possible. The date was moved to August 11, and then a round-the-clock effort readied the second bomb on August 9, less than three days after Hiroshima.<sup>67</sup>

Evidence is clear now that although the Hiroshima bomb did get the attention of Japan's military leaders and the Emperor himself, it was the second bomb that gave the Emperor the leverage to convince his military advisers to accept the Potsdam Proclamation for surrender.

**Shock Effect.** The Truman administration's objective was to shock a weakened Japan into early surrender. The United States had no reason to think that one shock would be enough to cause surrender. Although Groves and Purnell correctly felt that two bombs would bring results, the worst case scenario within the administration was that it would take several nuclear bombs.

This pessimistic view was partly due to underestimating the bomb's power, hence its shock value, but mostly due to the increasingly bitter resistance of Japanese soldiers and to continued belligerent statements coming from Tokyo.<sup>68</sup>

When physicist Norman F. Ramsey was sent to Tinian Island in the Marianas to supervise preparation of the atomic bombs for loading on aircraft, he expected a long assignment. He told his crew of nuclear specialists that they would serve a six-month tour of duty on the island. He had been instructed that fifty nuclear bombs might be required to force the surrender of the Japanese. This estimate was made by looking at Japanese demonstrated capacity to absorb punishment and the estimate that each bomb was equivalent to about one week of bombing raids with conventional explosives.<sup>69</sup>

This pessimism continued until the end of the war. Even on 12 August, after the atomic bombings, Soviet entry, and the first tentative Japanese offer to accept the Potsdam terms, Major General Clayton Bissell, Army G-2, wrote a memo to General Marshall speculating on Japanese actions. This memo read, "Atomic bombs will not have a decisive effect in the next 30 days."<sup>70</sup>

The dropping of the Hiroshima bomb on the morning of 6 August sent Japanese leaders, both civilian and military into a frenzy of activity. Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo told Emperor Hirohito about the atomic bomb and urged that Japan end the war at once. To do so, Premier Suzuki would have to assemble the

Supreme Council for the Direction of the War. However, the military members of the council avoided Suzuki's summons.<sup>71</sup> This cost Japan precious time.

On 8 August, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan effective 9 August. On Thursday, 9 August, Foreign Minister Togo demanded that Premier Suzuki call an immediate meeting of the Supreme Council. Admiral Mitsumasa Yonai, the Navy Minister, reluctantly conceded that Japan must surrender. This put a senior military man on Togo's side. Finally, Suzuki was successful at calling a meeting which took place in an air-raid shelter 60 feet underneath the Imperial Palace in Tokyo.<sup>72</sup>

As this meeting started, there was a general fear among the Japanese leaders that an atom bomb would soon drop on Tokyo. This was due to a false rumor started by 1ST Lieutenant Marcus McDilda, a B-29 pilot who bailed out of a B-29 shot down over Osaka on August 8. McDilda knew nothing about atomic bomb targets. However, when he was beaten and interrogated he came up with this story that added to the ardent fear among some of the Japanese leaders.<sup>73</sup>

On 9 August at 11:00 in the morning, as the B-29 carrying the plutonium bomb approached Nagasaki, the generals, admirals, and civilian members of the Supreme War Council met at the Imperial Palace. The military members were rationalizing the effects of the first atomic bomb. The group had finally accepted that it seemed the bomb just dropped on Hiroshima had been an atomic bomb. Given that it was atomic and that everyone knew

that the Americans had thousands of B-29s, then there must simply have been that one bomb. Therefore, War Minister Anami said, that there would be no more atomic attacks.<sup>74</sup>

General Umezu took a little different approach. He argued that "even that United States could not possibly possess enough radioactive material to make a sufficient number of bombs to permit a continuation of such attacks." Anami, Umezu, and Toyoda stood their ground. They emphasized that there was only one atomic bomb, and even given Soviet entry into the war, the decisive battle of the homeland must be fought.<sup>75</sup>

Although the military leaders wanted a decisive battle, the emperor did not. Ever since January 1945, when the U.S. Sixth Army landed on Luzon, Hirohito had been thinking seriously about a negotiated end to the war. He had confided his thoughts to his closest advisers - Marquis Koichi Kido, the lord privy seal, and Prince Fumminaro Konoye, an aristocratic politician.<sup>76</sup>

By Mid-June the emperor had agreed with the peace party that the time to give up had arrived. However, even with his godlike stature, he could not simply impose his will on a military machine determined to fight a decisive battle of the homeland, and capable of governing by assassination if thwarted. Kido, Premier Suzuki, and Togo, who all wanted peace, could have been assassinated and the emperor taken into protective custody in order to keep fighting.<sup>77</sup> This feeling continued after Hiroshima, when the emperor made a secret decision to seek peace. However, he was not able to convince his military to give up

their hopes for a decisive battle of the homeland.<sup>78</sup>

As the meeting went on, Suzuki told the other members of the Big Six that the war must end. Togo and Yonai agreed but they felt that they should seek to modify the Potsdam Proclamation to say no occupation of Japan or hardly more than a token occupation, no war-crimes trials , and disarming and demobilization of Japanese troops under supervision of their own officers. While this discussion was going on, word of the Nagasaki bomb came to the group.<sup>79</sup>

The question of how many more bombs existed was now on everyone's mind. Still, the debate raged on. They adjourned this meeting and called another at 2:30 PM. When gathered again, Genae Abe, Minister of Home Affairs said that he could not guarantee civil obedience if Japan surrendered. He supported the military in continuing to fight the decisive battle.<sup>80</sup> The council was deadlocked. Suzuki, Togo, and Yonai on the side of surrender and Anami, Umezu, and Toyoda on the side of fighting a last decisive battle.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, at still another subsequent meeting of the supreme council Premier Suzuki asked the Emperor for a decision. This had never been done in modern Japanese history. The emperor told the group that he did not believe that his nation could continue to fight a war despite what the military claimed about the Decisive Battle. He said that the Allied proclamation should be accepted on the basis outlined by the Foreign Minister. Based on the Emperor's intervention, the Supreme Council agreed.<sup>82</sup>

At 7 A.M., August 10 (Washington time), the United States received the decision through diplomatic channels. After President Truman called a meeting of his closest advisors Japan received the U.S response by 3:45 P.M. that "the authority of the Emperor and the Japanese Government to rule the state shall be subject to the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers who will take such steps as he deems proper to effectuate the surrender terms." Other demands included the immediate release of all Allied prisoners, and establishment of a government "by the freely expressed will of the Japanese people."<sup>83</sup>

The next few days were critical to Japan. The Emperor advised the Supreme Council that it was his wish (not his decision) to accept the new U.S. terms. Finally the Supreme Council agreed. However, the emperor's triumph over the militarists was very narrow and caused several insurrections. To convince the United States not to drop another bomb while in this state of confusion, on 12 Aug, the Domei News Agency broadcasted the text of Japan's conditional acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration even before the status of the emperor had been settled.<sup>84</sup>

The military coups cause Japanese waffling that went on until 14 August. That morning President Truman received a report that the messages from Japan did not contain the expected reply. Sorrowfully, the President remarked another bomb now seemed the only way to hasten the end. Shortly after this remark, the Japanese acceptance arrived.<sup>85</sup>

General Grove's two bomb plan had worked. The shock of the two atom bombs gave the emperor the leverage to compel compliance with his decision. The second bomb kept the Japanese leaders off balance until they finally agreed to surrender.

Would this have eventually happened without the second bomb? No one really knows for sure. However, no account of the deliberations in the Supreme Council for the Direction of the war on 9 August shows that without Nagasaki, the emperor would have been able to prevail when he finally declared himself.<sup>86</sup> Japan had demonstrated a great capacity to absorb punishment and still remain bellicose. Every day that went by without another bomb would have reinforced the militarists argument that the United States had only one bomb. The belief that two bombs in quick succession would be more potent than spreading them out seems reasonable.<sup>87</sup>

***Did the United States drop the bombs primarily as a diplomatic device for dealing with the postwar Soviet Union?***

The charge that Truman and his advisors dropped the bombs to intimidate the Soviet Union probably has a kernel of truth. However, it is inconsistent with evidence to say that it was the primary motivating factor for Trumans's decision.

Anticommunism and anti-Sovietism had flourished in 1920s America, decreased during the war, and began growing in 1944 as Russians occupied Eastern Europe. President Truman, James

Byrnes, Ambassador Averell Harriman, and a few others worried about the expansion of Soviet power, and welcomed the clout that possession of nuclear weapons gave the United States. However, this uneasiness about the Soviets in the summer of 1945 was not a full-blown cold war. Checkmating Soviet moves did not dominate Truman's decisions until much later.<sup>88</sup>

It is true that there was a consideration by Truman and his advisors about how the Soviet Union would view the bomb. However, the evidence is compelling that the primary reason Harry Truman ordered the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was to end the war as soon as possible to save lives.

***Did President Harry Truman make the right decision?***

After weighing the evidence, the answer is yes. President Truman made the right decision when you consider the options available to him. Truman had to confront an immediate problem and saw the potential of the bomb to end the war plus deal with Soviet aggressiveness. In spite of the evidence cited in this paper, there have been many "Monday morning quarterbacks" who say that the decision was wrong for various reasons.

In 1995, the year of the 50th anniversary of the bombing, there were nine new books written on the Atomic Bombings. Three of these books were written by revisionists who find various faults in Truman's decision. However, none of these authors offer convincing evidence to suggest that their alternative strategies would have produced a better world.<sup>89</sup>

There are some key considerations which opponents of Truman's decision never mention--like the issue of civilian control over the military, the lack of moral outrage by advisors who revisionist claim were against the bomb, and whether any other country possessing the bomb would have used it.<sup>90</sup> Still another key consideration is the redefining of morality that occurred during this awful war.

The atomic decision was made cleanly and properly by the civilian Commander in Chief of the armed forces in accordance with the Constitution. It is interesting to compare the dominating political role of the Japanese high command and the subordinate military role of the American Joint Chiefs in the war.<sup>91</sup>

Some of Truman's critics make much of reservations by military and civilian leaders before the bombs were dropped. It is interesting to note that no one has ever documented that any body in Truman's administration, or any military officers even threatened to resign, much less did so to indicate moral outrage. If military officers are bound to disobey illegal or immoral orders, then George Marshall, William Leahy, Earnest King, and Douglas MacArthur, to name some alleged opponents of the bomb, did not do their duty. Perhaps, a more probable conclusion is that their views have been taken out of context.<sup>92</sup>

It is interesting that Trumans's critics do not suggest that any other country possessing the bomb would not have used it. Ideally, we expect the United States to hold itself to a higher

standard than our enemies. However, by 1945, the rigors of war weighed heavily on all combatants. In a democracy, the most important imperative, after victory itself, was to stop the killing of American men as well as foreign men, women, and children.<sup>93</sup> The atom bomb did this.

We must remember, that the idea of the bomb originated as a race against the German use of the weapon. In addition to the United States and Germany, the Soviet Union and Japan had nuclear programs. "The United States was not morally unique--just technologically exceptional. Only it had the bomb, and so only it used it."<sup>94</sup> Minoru Genda, the Japanese naval officer who planned the attack on Pearl Harbor, visited Annapolis, Maryland in the 1970s. While there he was asked weather Japan would have used the A-bomb. Without hesitation he candidly answered that he thought so.

Finally, when looking at criticism of Truman's decision on a moral ground you cannot consider his decision in isolation, though many critics have tried. The United States made the decision to accept massive losses of civilian life when it began the fire attacks on Japanese cities, not when President Truman decided to use the atomic bomb and this was done before Truman was President.<sup>95</sup> Critics of the decision to drop the bomb fail to realize that the decision reflected the bomb's capability to make a difference in a long and ugly war, not America's immorality.<sup>96</sup>

**It should not be forgotten that the atomic bomb was**

made in this country as a preventive measure; it was to head off its use by the Germans, if they discovered it. The bombing of civilian centers was initiated by the Germans and adopted by the Japanese. To it the Allies responded in kind--as it turned out with greater effectiveness--and they were morally justified in doing so.

Albert Einstein<sup>97</sup>

**Attacking Japan's Center of Gravity--why the bombs worked.**

The atomic bombs brought about an end to the War in the Pacific because they were an indirect attack on Japan's Center of Gravity. FM 100-5 Operations defines the center of gravity as "the hub of all power and movement upon which everything depends. It is that characteristic, capability or location from which enemy and friendly forces derive their freedom of action, physical strength, or will fight."<sup>98</sup>

Using that definition, by the end of the war both the United States and Japan knew what their enemy's center of gravity was and they both attacked it. Neither did the kind of analysis we do today since the revival of Clausewitz in the United States Army. However, senior planners of both countries unknowingly applied the principals that Clausewitz expounds. Those principles are to identify enemy centers of gravity and vulnerabilities. Then, using your limited resources to attack them while protecting your own centers of gravity and

vulnerabilities. The United States nuclear attack was directed at the small group of military leaders that administered the war. Japanese plans were to attack the American will to fight in a last great "decisive battle" for the homeland.

In the end the reason that the United States and its allies were able to dictate terms at the end of the war is that the United States attacked the Japanese center of gravity while at the same time making it clear to the Japanese leaders that the United States center of gravity would no longer be held at risk.

As mentioned before, the Truman administration's goal was to shock a weakened Japan into early surrender. The plan for dropping of the bombs in close succession was done as an attack of terror to gain a direct psychological effect. As General Leslie Groves said, the bombs must be dropped close together "so that the Japanese would not have time to recover their balance."<sup>99</sup>

There was a fear that the Japanese leaders could rationalize one bomb. Which they did. However, the effect of dropping two in quick succession, on targets that had been spared from the firebombing raids forced the elite group of Japanese leaders to deal with a new threat. The goal was to send the message that Truman's "rain of ruin" was possible. The plan worked. The plan led to Emperor Hirohito's comments during his rescript, "the enemy has begun to use a new and most cruel bomb".<sup>100</sup>

While we were attacking the Japanese center of gravity, Japan's plan for a last great decisive battle was to be an attack

at the United States center of gravity, the will of its people to keep enduring a protracted and costly war. It now seemed that the United States center of gravity was no longer at risk. The atomic bomb made it obvious that the United States no longer felt that the invasion was necessary, it could conduct Truman's "rain of ruin." As Premier Suzuki said, the Japanese war "aim", had been "lost by the enemy's use of the new-type bomb."<sup>101</sup>

**Conclusion:** The decision to drop the atomic bomb to end the War in the Pacific is a relevant subject for senior military and national leaders to understand well. Mitchel Reiss, a White House aide in 1988-89 says of the 50 years following the dropping of the atomic bombs, "never before in military history have countries exercised such restraint with the destructive power at their disposal." We should not become complacent. He cautions, "The danger is that as the echoes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki grow more distant with the passing of time, the devastation and unspeakable horror of those events may fade from our collective memories. We forget at our peril."<sup>102</sup>

The decision to drop the atomic bomb is like any historical event. Later interpretations of what happened may be quite different than what actually took place. It is very difficult to understand the complete motivations for a decision with as many complex variables as the one Truman had to make. We can only look at records of events and accounts of people like Truman, his administration, his military leaders, and the scientists who helped build the bomb. Then there is the issue of interpreting

comments on those events and accounts. These interpretations can and do differ. That is partially because as William Shakespeare said, "the devil can cite scripture for his own purpose."<sup>103</sup> Therefore, we must view historical decisions in the context of the times that they were made and come to our own conclusions.

We have solved the mysteries of the atom. Maybe we can use the power of the atom to do more than put an end to one desperate war. Perhaps we can find a safe, worthwhile use that will make its discovery a great positive step for man. However, if we forget the pain and suffering nuclear energy is capable of we may want to use it again. With today's weapons, it is easy to imagine scenarios that lead to a destruction of our world as we know it.

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